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A NEW DAWN

IN CALCUTTA

Calcutta Trilogy – book 2

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*To Manju who loved till the end without
planning any return*

INTRODUCTION

This is the continuation of the story of Joseph and Lilian, who has now reclaimed the name of her childhood: Manju. A simple gesture, yet laden with meaning. Returning to her first name is a sign of rootedness, of new life, of fidelity to her family and her origins. It is as though, in her journey, she wished to declare to the world that rebirth is never an escape, but a transformed return. The tale is anchored in the one that came before: Balajinagar's Nights. Many of the themes already explored in Balajinagar reappear, though seen from a new perspective. Joel and Ananda are no longer present, at least not outwardly. Their voices have fallen silent, leaving space for the inexperienced hands of Joseph and Manju. It is now for them to discover new paths, to open doors that seem not to exist, to invent ways where others see only walls. This is the responsibility and the grace of those who find themselves called to build without possessing all the answers. The central theme running through these pages is the meaning of life. Not as an abstract concept, but as a tangible desire: to devote oneself to what feels most natural: helping others. It is an impulse born of the heart, yet one that collides with human fragility, weakness, and guilt. Who has not felt the smallness of being crushed beneath problems greater than oneself? Joseph and Manju remind us that precisely there, in that disproportion, lies the possibility of a true encounter.

Religion also returns as a theme, though not as a set of obligations to be fulfilled. Here, faith is a search, a discovery of God who reveals Himself in unexpected ways, in faces, in stories, in wounds. It is not a linear path, but a weaving together of falls and resurrections, of doubts and sudden insights. It is an invitation to look beyond outward forms, to recognise the presence of a God who surprises, who allows Himself to be found where least expected.

This book is therefore a new journey. Not only for Joseph and Manju, but for every reader. It is an invitation to rediscover a part of oneself, to be unsettled by the questions that arise, to recognise in the characters' fragilities one's own, and in their choices the courage that each of us may reclaim. There are no easy answers, but there are doors that open, shafts of light that break through, signs of life that are reborn.

To enter these pages is to accept walking alongside Joseph and Manju, to share their fears and their hopes, to be touched by their choices. It is also to accept that the story is never closed, that every ending is a new beginning, and that life, when given, always becomes greater than we could ever have imagined.

Chapter I

A NEW BEGINNING

‘What’s troubling you?’ Manju’s voice was gentle, almost like a caress.

Joseph sighed. ‘I don’t know... It’s the whole situation. We’ve been here three months, and yet it still feels strange to me.’

Manju laughed softly, shaking her head.

‘I don’t think you’ll ever get used to it. You grew up in the convent, and all your life you’ve known nothing beyond that world.’

Three months had passed since they had left Bhubaneshwar. At dawn they had set out, without a clear destination. To others it had seemed like an escape; to them, it was a leap into the future, a future to be built together. Calcutta had drawn them precisely for that reason: a vast city, without ties, without anchors, yet brimming with possibilities. They had carried only the money needed for the journey, as though to cut every bridge with the past. To mark this new beginning, Manju had chosen to abandon the name by which everyone knew her: Lilian, and reclaim the one her parents had given her at birth. It was a severing of recent ties, but also a final thread connecting her to the family she had left so abruptly, yet to whom she remained deeply bound.

Howrah Station had welcomed them with its chaos. Joseph,

bewildered, watched the crowd, the voices, the confusion. Bhubaneswar had been a shock, but at least there he had a community behind him, a refuge. In Calcutta they were alone. Everything was larger: wealth and poverty, elegant boulevards and foul-smelling slums.

Outside the station, Joseph bought a newspaper, not knowing what he was looking for. In other times he would have entered a church to pray, but now he lacked the courage. Speaking to God felt almost like betrayal, a gesture that unsettled him.

A boy approached.

‘Saib, shall I carry your bag?’

‘No, thank you.’

The boy persisted:

‘Do you want a rickshaw? I’ve a friend who knows all the hotels in the city.’

‘No hotel, thank you.’

Joseph was visibly uneasy. Manju intervened with natural ease:

‘What’s your name?’

The boy looked surprised. He was not used to being addressed with kindness. He smiled, revealing broken teeth and empty spaces. ‘Satish’, he answered.

‘Do you know if there’s a Christian school nearby? Or a church?’

Joseph asked.

Satish directed them to Holy Cross School, a large building worn by time yet still alive. Seeing the children running up and down the corridors stirred in both of them a nostalgia for their own

school. They wondered how their sudden departure had been received, what challenges their colleagues were now facing. They did not speak of it, but each, inwardly, felt the absence of that familiar bustle, those problems, that place they had called 'home'.

There they were welcomed by the headmaster, a sturdy priest with hair already flecked with white. His office was imposing, as were his desk and the wooden plaque above it displaying his many academic titles. Joseph felt small before such solemnity.

It was Manju who spoke:

'We were married recently. Joseph is from Karnataka, I am from Orissa. We have taught in various schools and hoped that here, in Calcutta, we might find employment.'

The headmaster listened courteously, but his reply was cold:

'For now there are no vacancies. The school year has already begun. Perhaps in summer a position may open. Leave me your contact details and references, and I shall call you.'

Joseph felt ashamed. They had no address, no recommendations. They left in silence, with a sense of emptiness. They crossed Howrah Bridge and reached the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Rosary. There, a small sign of the Diocesan Caritas led them to an office. A smiling young woman welcomed them. Manju explained their situation: newly arrived, without home or work.

'You may stay in our hostel for two or three days,' said the woman. 'After that you must find your own place. As for work, tomorrow you may speak with my colleague. It will not be easy;

hundreds of people arrive here every day.’

She accompanied them to the lodgings. Manju was placed in the women’s dormitory, Joseph in the men’s: a large hall with ten bunk beds.

‘This is your place. Dinner will be served at seven.’

Joseph felt humiliated. For years he had not shared a room with others. Privacy was a luxury the poor could not afford. After dinner he lay down on the bed, thinking of Manju. He missed her voice, her gaze. For years he had spoken of poverty, of helping the least. At Balajinagar he had even persuaded Agostino to move their house among the slums. But that had been a home, poor, yet dignified. Now, for the first time, he understood what it truly meant to become poor with the poor, and not merely to assist them.

Chapter II

THE WEIGHT OF THE PAST

After three months, they had finally managed to find work and rent a small studio flat. A single room in a crowded block of flats, expensive for the area and for their circumstances, yet it offered what they most longed for: a bathroom of their own, a little privacy, electricity and running water.

Joseph worked as a porter in a three-star hotel: carrying luggage, cleaning rooms, performing whatever tasks the owner assigned him. Manju, in the same hotel, helped in the kitchen. The place was always bustling: businessmen passing through, couples on holiday, and now and then young foreigners drawn to India's exotic allure.

In the evenings they returned home exhausted. Joseph managed to collect a few tips to supplement his meagre wages; Manju brought back leftovers from the guests' meals.

'What's wrong?' Manju asked, her voice soft and soothing.

Joseph hesitated.

'I don't know. We've been here three months, and yet I still can't get used to it. The whole situation feels strange. When we left, we knew it wouldn't be easy. We had courage, for love of each other. My love for you is stronger than ever, but I feel disillusioned. At Balajinagar we served the poor, we faced hardships together that bound us. Here, instead, I find myself

trapped in a routine where I serve the rich. Every day I pass by huts and beggars, people half-dead, waiting for a coin. And all I can do is leave a few coins, a smile, perhaps a bowl of rice. I fear I've lost the meaning of my life.'

Manju looked at him with gentle firmness.

'Joseph, you grew up believing yourself a superman. You boasted of defending the poor, you fought against Digal and came out victorious. Now you are learning another lesson, harsher but necessary: the lesson of weakness, of impotence. For years you preached Christ on the cross, telling your people not to seek miracles but to trust in His suffering and His love. Now you must preach that to yourself. You cannot work miracles, neither for them nor for yourself. But we are sharing their life, and from this we shall learn much. For now, we need this humble work, to put aside a little money. Later, when we are more stable, we shall look for something more useful, perhaps with charitable organisations. Let us see what Providence has in store.'

Joseph listened, yet inside he felt a burden. Since leaving Bhubaneshwar, he had not been able to turn to God. Shame gnawed at him. He did not pray, did not enter churches, did not attend services. It was as though he wished to erase his former life, but in doing so he was left only with guilt and the sense of being a coward in flight.

For Manju, God remained a natural presence, almost indifferent to circumstances: whether in the convent, beside Raju as his wife, or fleeing with Joseph, her faith did not waver. What tore at her

was not the choice of life, but the denial of motherhood. The child she had sworn to protect was gone, and his image pursued her like a shadow. With Joseph she could laugh, show joy and irony, but within she carried the pain of not having saved his son, and the fear that, should another child come, she might fail to protect him once again.

Each morning, on their way to work, Joseph stared at the beggars; Manju watched the children crowding the streets, some going to school, others playing, others begging. It was an open wound. She missed the school at Balajinagar, the struggles to secure education for the children of the slums, Raj's smile, the lessons, the celebrations.

In Calcutta they had not managed to build a social life. The city was cosmopolitan, and they did not appear as strangers, yet within them lay mistrust. If they formed friendships, sooner or later someone would ask: Where do you come from? How did you meet? What did you do before? Why are you here? To lie? To tell the truth? And then—what would people think of them? The past was a weight, a boulder impossible to shift.

Chapter III

LEENA

The news of Leena's dismissal, a colleague from the kitchen, struck Manju more deeply than she had expected. Leena had never been an outgoing woman, yet her sudden absence left a void. Manju decided to visit her.

She set out towards Ananda Nagar. As soon as she entered the narrow lanes of the slum, a wave of memories carried her back to the poorest quarters of Balajinagar. Narrow dirt tracks, huts of tin and plywood, women crouched before makeshift fires heating water for tea or boiling rice. Naked children, fingers in their mouths, grains of rice stuck to their lips, sat beside their mothers; the older ones ran everywhere, barefoot, shouting and laughing. Leena's home was slightly better than the others: a few new sheets of tin, a repaired roof, signs of small improvements born of her labour. Manju knocked softly, and Leena appeared at the doorway, her face weary yet welcoming.

'Leena... what happened? Why were you absent so often?'

The woman lowered her gaze.

'My child is only two. I used to leave him with my cousin, but she was often away. Now she has decided to return to the village in Jharkhand. She says that there, with a little land and two hens, life is better than here, amidst smoke and dirty water. My son is sickly, and we have no money for medicine or milk. My husband

works as a rickshaw driver: he pedals twelve hours a day, hauling rich men from one side of the city to the other. He doesn't earn much, but at least he brings something home. As for me... now that I've lost my job, I don't know what to do. I must stay here to look after my child.'

Manju listened with a heavy heart. The story reminded her of Raj and his mother, who had vanished suddenly, leaving behind only an abandoned child.

'Perhaps we can find someone else to help you with the little one,' she said, 'so you might return to work.'

When she returned home, Manju was devastated. She told Joseph everything, and he shared her anguish.

'You know,' he said, 'after living in Balajinagar, I thought I had grown accustomed to poverty, to problems, even to defeats. We encountered so many situations like Leena's, and yet one never grows used to poverty. As you reminded me, there we were fighting, and that eased our conscience. We could not solve the problems, but at least we were struggling alongside them. Here we are truly powerless. The anguish of others confronts us with the weakness of our feelings, the fragility of our nature. This is a lesson we shall never cease to learn, but it is vital that we face it together, for it will be our unity that keeps us strong enough to continue the fight.'

And thinking of Leena and her plight, Joseph recalled the newspaper he had bought on their first day. In it he had read an advertisement for a nursery seeking a cook. He rummaged

through his bag and found the crumpled sheet: *The Garden of Hope – Cook Wanted*.

The next day, after their shift, they went together to the address. The institution was simple, on the northern outskirts of Calcutta, run by the Methodist Church of Bengal. They were welcomed kindly and told Leena's story.

'The position for a cook is no longer available,' explained the director, 'but if she is willing to do cleaning and care for the younger children, we can employ her. And she may bring her child here as well. It is not much, but she will have a secure meal and a clean place for eight hours a day.'

Manju and Joseph left with lighter hearts. They hurried to Leena to give her the news. The woman looked at them in disbelief, then burst into tears.

'I don't know how to thank you...'

For the first time since arriving in Calcutta, Joseph and Manju felt they had done something that restored meaning to their days.

Chapter IV

ANEETHA

The friendship between Manju and Leena grew day by day. It was no longer merely a bond between former colleagues: they now confided in one another, supported each other, sought each other out. Even Leena's husband, Ravi, began to spend time with Joseph and Manju. A quiet man, marked by the toil of pedalling his rickshaw for twelve hours a day, he found in Joseph a listener—attentive, unjudging.

Often, on their days off, Joseph and Manju went to Ananda Nagar. The narrow lanes of the slum, with their tin shacks and barefoot children running through puddles, had become part of their daily landscape. Each time, Manju felt a mixture of nostalgia and pain: Balajinagar returned to her mind, with its struggles and its hopes.

One afternoon, Leena invited them to a celebration organised by the nursery where she worked.

‘Come,’ she said eagerly, ‘there will be songs, games, and even a small refreshment. I want to introduce you to my colleagues.’

Joseph hesitated.

‘It’s a Protestant church...’

Manju looked at him with gentle firmness.

‘And so what? This is not the time to judge. It could be a first

step towards reconnecting with God, with your deepest self. Come with an open heart.'

In the end, he agreed.

The celebration was simple yet warm. Children sang, mothers smiled, volunteers served sweets and drinks. Joseph and Manju felt welcomed. They learnt of other initiatives run by the same church and by other Protestant communities: schools, centres of assistance, small works born to restore dignity to the poor. Joseph, though silent, sensed a new horizon. Perhaps, one day, he too might rediscover meaning in that world.

But the light of that day was soon overshadowed by terrible news. Aneetha, the thirteen-year-old daughter of their neighbours, had not returned from school. The night passed without word. It had never happened before.

The following day, Joseph, taking advantage of his day off, accompanied Balraj, the girl's father, to the police station. They showed a photo of Aneetha. The officer listened distractedly, then said:

'For forty-eight hours we cannot accept a report. It may be a voluntary escape. She is a pretty girl, perhaps she has fallen in love and decided to run away with someone.'

Balraj grew furious.

'My daughter is not like that! She has never gone out without telling us.'

But his words fell into emptiness.

They did not give up. They returned to the school, asked

questions. No one had noticed anything unusual. Only one classmate said:

‘After lessons, I saw her speaking with a well-dressed man. Then she got into his car.’

Despair deepened.

Joseph and Balraj went to an office of the Methodist Church, one of those they had discovered during the celebration. There they spoke with a social worker. His voice was grave:

‘Every month dozens of girls disappear. It is the racket of child prostitution. They are taken to Bombay or Delhi, and from there others are sent to Calcutta, to confuse the tracks. It is not easy to find them.’

Balraj and his wife were shattered. Hope seemed to dissolve.

A few days later, Balraj heard of a nightclub not far from the school. Rumour had it that, for special and well-paying clients, very young girls were offered. He decided to try.

That evening he went to the club. He ordered a beer, watched the dancers, tried to ask questions.

‘Do you have... something different? Younger girls?’

The barman stared at him suspiciously. Soon after, a guard seized his arm and dragged him into a dark alley. They beat him, demanding to know for whom he worked. Amidst the blows, Balraj managed only to cry:

‘I am looking for my daughter!’

At last, they left him on the ground, bleeding.

‘Your daughter is not here,’ they said, before vanishing into the

shadows.

Balraj returned home destroyed. He scarcely felt the pain of the blows, but the pain of failure. He had found nothing, only the confirmation that his child had been swallowed by a dark and merciless world.

Chapter V

A DOOR OPENS

The news came unexpectedly. One evening, while Manju was tidying the kitchen, Leena approached her with a shy smile.

‘You know, our centre is looking for a new head. The director is moving to Delhi. I mentioned your name...’

Manju looked at her in surprise.

‘My name?’

‘Yes. They already know you, they’ve seen you here several times. They’ve decided to offer you three months on trial.’

A shiver of emotion ran through Manju. A door was opening, a real chance to help the poor not only with isolated gestures, but through daily commitment. She accepted without hesitation.

The following day, the director called her into her office. She was a middle-aged woman, gentle yet firm in manner.

‘Before I leave you the post, I want to give you some recommendations. Our children come from families of different social levels and castes. We try not to make distinctions. We tell the parents clearly: here all must be treated the same. If they do not accept that, they are free to go elsewhere.’

Manju nodded, listening attentively.

‘The situation becomes delicate when caste issues arise. Some do not want their children to mix with those of other castes. You must never entertain the arguments of those who protest: on such

matters it is easy to fall into endless disputes.’

The director paused, then continued in a graver tone.

‘One last point: religion. Here too we try not to make distinctions, but difficulties increase when festivals approach. Each demands that their own be celebrated, and none accept that their children take part in those of another faith. We have chosen a simple path: for the major Hindu and Muslim festivals, the children stay at home and celebrate with their families. They know well that we are a Christian school. All, however, take part in the great performances for Christmas and Easter. We do not wish to convert anyone, but we want them to know the central points of our faith. For this reason, we ask parents to sign a document agreeing to let their children join in the songs and plays.’

Manju reflected. The director’s words seemed sensible, and she gratefully accepted the months of trial.

That evening she told Joseph everything. He listened in silence, then shook his head.

‘There are no easy solutions to religious problems. Consider that many parents cannot read or write. They sign a document that means nothing to them. The problems will not come from the parents, but from the religious leaders. If one day they wished to accuse you, they would say you forced those families to accept, just to secure a place for their child. That signed paper could be used as proof of attempted conversion. And you know how delicate that subject is in India today.’

Manju remained thoughtful.

‘But the nursery has been running for ten years without problems...’

Joseph sighed.

‘As long as things go well, all flows smoothly. But if something begins to go wrong, society will look for someone to blame. And that someone could be you.’

His words weighed like stones. Yet within her, hope was stronger than fear.

‘It’s only three months on trial,’ she said firmly. ‘It’s worth trying.’

Joseph looked at her with a mixture of concern and admiration.

‘Then do it. But be cautious. Never forget that your strength lies not in the role they give you, but in your ability to build a team with those who work alongside you, and to remain united with those who suffer.’

Manju smiled.

‘That is exactly what I want: to stay close to the poor, and to give the children a place where they feel equal.’

That night, as she lay down to sleep, she felt that a new phase of her life was beginning. She did not know whether it would be easy or difficult, but she was certain of one thing: she would face every challenge with the same determination that had brought her this far.

Chapter VI

RESPONSIBILITY

Manju had accepted her new role with determination: to direct the nursery and kindergarten. It was not merely a title, nor an office with papers to sign. It was a weight that settled on her shoulders every morning, as she passed through the rusted iron gate and heard the children's voices already filling the air. Every problem, every cry, every fever, every missed caress came to her. At first she thought her task was chiefly organisational: checking attendance, managing the teachers, ensuring lunch was ready. But she soon realised that behind each child lay a greater story, a family carrying the burden of survival.

Many of those little ones returned in the evening to homes where electric light was a rare luxury and clean water a distant dream. Mothers, after endless days of labour, came back exhausted, unable to give time or care. Thus, when the children returned from the nursery, they often found neither a warm meal nor an embrace. Daily necessities were entrusted to elder sisters: girls of ten or twelve, barefoot and in worn clothes, often queuing at the public tap to fetch water. Hours of waiting under the sun, then the return home with two heavy containers, over twenty kilos of water bending their backs and shaking their arms.

Manju watched these scenes with silent pain. She knew that at lunchtime the children had eaten at the nursery, and that in the

evening they often received nothing: the little food left was destined for adults or older siblings. It was not neglect, it was survival.

One day, a teacher reported a boy who seemed more irritable than usual. '*Tantrums*,' she had thought at first. But when Manju entered the room, she saw his laboured breathing, flushed face, feverish eyes. It was not a tantrum: it was pneumonia. Perhaps the child had caught cold after sweating at play, perhaps the fever had been ignored too long. Now strong medicine was needed, constant care, a clean environment. Taking him to hospital meant facing unbearable costs: paying consultations, buying medicines one by one, staying by the bed day and night.

Manju felt a guilt that was not hers, yet struck her nonetheless. If the teacher had noticed earlier, if she herself had been more vigilant, perhaps it could have been avoided.

It was then she understood: she could not remain shut in her office, waiting for problems to be brought to her. She had to walk among the children, listen to the teachers, observe the faces, catch the signs. She had to be present, not only as director, but as a woman who leads and accompanies.

So, she began spending more time in the classrooms, among the coloured tables and wooden toys. She stood beside the teachers, gave precise guidance: how to recognise illness, how to wash the children carefully, how to feed them even when they seemed to refuse food. It was not reproach, but support. She wanted each of them to feel they had a guide, an ally.

The days passed thus, amidst the clatter of dishes in the canteen, sudden laughter, cries mingling with the teachers' songs. Each child was a fragile universe, and Manju learnt to decipher their signs: a gesture of weariness, a sudden silence, a game abandoned too soon.

Every evening, returning home, she carried with her the images of those little ones: the queues at the tap, the water containers, the stifled cries, the sudden fevers. Yet alongside the pain, a new determination grew within her. The nursery could not be merely a place of custody: it had to become a refuge, a bastion of life, a starting point to change at least a fragment of that reality.

This burden that seemed to crush her was, in truth, giving her life again. It was bringing back the Manju who at Balajinagar had felt herself mother to all her pupils. Within her stirred a distant hope, a tenacious thread that allowed her to fight her sense of guilt: there she had failed to protect her own child, here she had the chance to redeem herself by protecting many more.

Chapter VII

SUDHEER

It was a hot, dusty afternoon when Lavinia, Sudheer's mother, arrived at the centre. Her eyes were swollen with tears, her hands trembling, her voice broken. She sought out Manju, as one seeks refuge when the storm is too fierce.

'My son...' she managed to say, 'he hasn't come home for days.' Manju sat her down, offered her a glass of water.

'Calm yourself, Lavinia. Tell me everything, from the beginning.'

The story came out in sobs. Sudheer was fourteen. He had studied until the age of eleven, then school had become an impossible luxury. Since then, he had begun to work: collecting scraps of metal, glass and paper from the city's bins, selling them for a few coins to those who recycled them. It was hard, dirty work, but at least it brought something home. Lately, however, the earnings had dwindled to nothing.

'There are too many collecting,' he would say, 'and in the wealthy areas they no longer let us in. Even those who control the recycling have changed: now they are stricter, and more violent.'

Manju listened in silence, absorbing every detail.

'Do not worry, Lavinia. I will do what I can. You are not alone.' That evening she spoke with Joseph.

‘We must act,’ he said. ‘We cannot wait.’

On Sunday, their day of rest, they armed themselves with a photograph of the boy and much patience. They walked through the streets where poor youths loitered in groups. They approached many, showing the image.

‘Do you know him?’ Manju asked.

‘Perhaps,’ they replied, with mocking smiles.

‘Many pass through here. Then they go elsewhere.’

Joseph watched them closely.

‘It is not only poverty,’ he murmured to Manju.

‘It is as though they have lost all interest. Neither in life, nor in family.’

On Monday, Manju returned to the social worker. She told him what she had seen. He nodded, with ruthless realism:

‘Most of these boys, to endure fatigue and pain, chew *khaini* or *paan*. It dulls hunger, gives a little strength. But then, when that is no longer enough, they turn to synthetic glues, inhale toxic gases. It is the gateway to opiates. If Sudheer was bringing home less money, perhaps he was spending it on this.’

Manju was speechless.

‘You mean...?’

‘I mean he may already be on the road to addiction,’ concluded the social worker.

She could not remain still. She asked for a day off and returned to Lavinia.

‘Let us go together. We cannot wait.’

They set out for Mirza Ghalib Street, notorious for the sale of soft drugs. The side streets were a silent hell: boys sitting or lying on the ground, consumed by hunger and substances. Empty eyes, incoherent phrases, unpleasant remarks.

‘Do not stare too long,’ Manju told Lavinia. ‘We must look for Sudheer, if he is here.’

After hours of searching, they noticed a group quarrelling. Lavinia stopped, held her breath.

‘That voice...’ she said.

They drew closer. It was Sudheer, surrounded by other boys who were beating him.

‘You haven’t paid for yesterday! Bring us the money and then you’ll get what you want!’ they shouted.

‘Sudheer!’ cried Lavinia, throwing herself among them. She embraced him with desperate strength. The boys, startled by her intrusion, withdrew. Perhaps frightened, perhaps moved by a flicker of compassion.

The two women dragged Sudheer to the main road, hailed a rickshaw and brought him home.

The following days were a torment. Sudheer suffered withdrawal, trembling, weeping, retreating into silence.

‘I can’t do it, Mother,’ he whispered. ‘I need...’

‘You need me,’ Lavinia replied, holding him tightly.

Then, slowly, he returned to himself. He embraced his mother, begging forgiveness.

‘I felt useless. People looked at me as if I were rubbish. A friend

offered me opium to chew. At first it was strength, intoxication. Then it became chains.'

The social worker and Manju visited the family.

'The addiction is at its beginning,' they said. 'He can be recovered. But he must leave here. In Kolkata he risks falling back. In Assam we have a centre, in the countryside. He can undergo detoxification.'

'I can be cured? ... Mother, I want to be your son again,' said Sudheer, clutching his mother with tears in his eyes.

Lavinia caressed him as though he were once more a child, as though that gesture could erase days of absence and torment.

Manju watched them, her heart torn between pain and hope. She knew the path would be long, that addiction does not vanish with an embrace, but at least now there was a chance. A fragile chance, like a flame that might be extinguished by the first wind, yet still lighting the darkness.

Within her stirred a thought: how many mothers like Lavinia would knock at her door? How many sons like Sudheer would be lost in the streets of Mirza Ghalib Street? She could not delude herself that this was a definitive victory. It was only the beginning of a greater battle, one that would demand courage, patience, and stubborn hope.

And yet, in that moment, watching the boy pressed to his mother's chest, Manju felt that life could rise again from the ruins. It was not the end, but a fragile beginning.

Chapter VIII

PRAVEEN

The city stretched before him like a mosaic of contrasts: chaotic traffic, horns chasing one another, the spicy fragrance drifting from street kitchens mingled with the acrid smell of dust and sweat. Joseph walked slowly homeward, with the heavy step of one carrying a thought that finds no peace.

That evening, seated beside Manju, he let the silence dissolve. She was arranging the children's notebooks from the nursery, with the care of one who knows that every pencil mark is a small seed of the future. Joseph watched her, and at last spoke.

'Manju, I admire you. Every day I see you fighting, giving voice to those who have none. I, instead, remain shut within my work. They respect me, yes, but I do not feel I belong to anything. I miss the community, I miss the contact with the children, the sense of struggling together.'

Manju lifted her gaze, her eyes warm and steady.

'Joseph, you are part of this struggle, even if you do not see it. Without you, without your support, I could not go on. Your moment will come, but for now be patient. I need your counsel, and the children need to know you are there.'

Her words were like fresh water, yet within Joseph a knot remained. The memory of the parish at Balajinagar tormented

him: there he had breathed the sense of community; there he had felt himself part of a living body. Now, instead, he felt like an isolated cog.

A few days later, he decided to take a rickshaw home. The streets were crowded, vendors shouted their offers, and the sun was setting, painting the peeling façades orange. The driver, Praveen, pedalled with difficulty, his face hollowed by fatigue. Joseph noticed at once.

‘You seem very weary, my friend. Are you well?’

Praveen sighed, wiping his sweat with a worn handkerchief.

‘For days I’ve had pain in my kidneys. I eat little, drink less. But I cannot stop. My daughter is sixteen: we must think of her marriage, of the dowry. If I stopped for treatment, I would risk losing the savings of a lifetime.’

Joseph was struck. He knew of the custom of dowry, but had never reflected on the weight it could place upon a father’s health and future.

‘And if your health worsened? Would that not be an even greater risk?’

Praveen shook his head, with a bitter smile.

‘A good marriage for my daughter is the guarantee that she will be respected, that she may use her abilities. Without dowry, no one would accept her. I cannot afford to fail.’

The rickshaw stopped before Joseph’s home. Before alighting, he asked:

‘Where do you live? I shall come to visit you. I want to meet your

wife and daughter.’

Praveen nodded, grateful.

‘It would be an honour. We live in a neighbourhood near the flower market. It is not much, but it is home.’

Joseph paid him double the fare and bade him farewell with affection.

That evening he told Manju everything. She listened attentively, her hands folded in her lap, and said:

‘We cannot allow a father’s health to be sacrificed in this way. I shall seek solutions, speak with the families at the centre. Perhaps we shall find a way to help Praveen.’

Joseph looked at her, and for the first time felt his unease opening a passage: he was not merely a spectator, but part of a struggle that concerned the dignity of his people. The streets of Calcutta, with their smells and sounds, were no longer only the stage of his daily toil: they were becoming the place where his life could intertwine with that of others, where the hope of a new dawn began to take shape.

Chapter IX

THE VISIT TO PRAVEEN

Summer had arrived with its suffocating weight. The days seemed to stretch beneath the sun, and even the shadows moved slowly, as though weary of existence. Manju's nursery had closed for a month: a time for repairs, for tidying, but above all for rest for those who worked there.

Joseph seized the opportunity to involve Manju in a visit to Praveen. With them came a friend of hers, engaged in family ministry.

'Let us go in the late afternoon,' he said, 'when the heat is less fierce.'

So, towards five o'clock, they set out.

The flower market welcomed them with an explosion of colours and voices. Vendors called to the last customers, offering bunches of roses and carnations, while quick hands wove garlands of jasmine. Joseph paused for a moment, drawn to a bouquet of red roses. "*For Manju*", he thought, and bought it, smiling at his wife's surprised face.

Beyond the market, they turned into a side street. There the scene changed abruptly: potholes in the road, houses increasingly dilapidated, the acrid smoke of burning rubbish heaps. A line of girls waited patiently for their turn to fill water containers, their bare feet dusty, their eyes large and silent.

Praveen's house was no different from the others: a shack of tin and wood, marked by time and poverty. They were welcomed by his wife, who had just returned from work as a cleaner for a wealthy merchant. She greeted them with a shy but sincere smile. 'Welcome! Praveen told me of a *saib* who paid double the fare and promised to visit us. Come in, I shall make tea.'

On the outdoor fire she placed a small pot of water, while the three guests sat on worn mats. Joseph asked about the daughter. The woman sighed.

'She went out half an hour ago to fetch water. Until twelve she studied, and did well. But then... with puberty, we thought it better she leave school. Now she works with me, as housemaid. In this way we save a little money, and she does not risk falling in love or being courted by the boys in the neighbourhood.'

Manju and her friend listened in silence, their hearts heavy. The mother continued:

'We have begun to look around; some families would be willing for marriage, but the demands are high. Perhaps with another year of sacrifice we can offer her a better future. We love our daughter; we do not want her to end up in the hands of a man who would treat her as a slave.'

Her words rang strong. In the minds of the three visitors passed images of girls trapped in unhappy marriages, with violent men or men unable to hold a job, and all this simply because their families had not been able to prepare an adequate dowry. And within them, as Christians, the question burned: where had the

political promises on women's dignity gone, Gandhi's teachings, the churches' preaching on respect?

After a moment of silence, Joseph asked:

'And Praveen? When I met him, he seemed very weary.'

The wife lowered her gaze.

'Perhaps it is the heat, perhaps too much work. He has never spoken of illness. He is a caring man, but silent. He never reveals his suffering, preferring to struggle alone.'

Joseph urged her to watch carefully for any worrying signs. 'If you notice anything, take him to the mission clinic. Here is the address.' She nodded, grateful, as she served the steaming tea in small metal cups.

When they left, the sun was setting. On the road, Praveen's daughter was returning, carrying a heavy water container on her head. She was a slender girl, yet her face shone with a clear smile. The pink *chudidar* she wore made her even more graceful. From the determined way she walked, she seemed older than her sixteen years. Joseph watched her in silence, struck by the strength and fragility that coexisted in that young figure. In that moment he understood what Praveen meant when he spoke of the dowry. He was fighting to protect his daughter's dignity, to defend her smile from the shadow of an uncertain future.

Chapter X

ANEETHA'S CALVARY

Balraj knocked at Joseph's door, breath-less.

'They've called me from the General Hospital... Aneetha is there. They found her in a pool of blood.'

A chill ran down Joseph's spine. He asked no more. Together they rushed towards the hospital.

Aneetha's disappearance had left behind only suspicions and whispers. Some had murmured of a racket, of men luring girls. Now the truth had taken flesh: pain, blood, suffering.

Aneetha had been dragged into a world of locked rooms, false promises, and nights sold. For months she had lived as a prisoner, forced to wear smiles that were not hers. Each morning she returned to that windowless centre, each evening she went out to accompany men who called her "lady" but treated her as merchandise.

One night, a wealthy and inexperienced boy had taken her away. Aneetha had seized upon his naivety as a glimmer of freedom. She told him of her family's misery, her sick father, her captivity. The young man was moved to pity. Quietly, without passing through reception, he led her to another hotel.

But in the morning, while he paid the bill, two guards from the brothel seized him and beat him. Aneetha fled through the alleys, never looking back.

Her body could endure no more. Pain, nausea, vomiting. In a pharmacy, a rapid test revealed pregnancy. Aneetha left pretending indifference, but inside she felt only vertigo.

On the train to Calcutta, the thought tormented her: *“What will my parents say? I have brought dishonour. They will never accept me.”*

On arrival, she sought out Samira, her closest friend. She told her everything, begging for help. Samira took her to an old woman who performed clandestine abortions. With a few coins they obtained the intervention. But the bleeding began to flow too heavily. The woman patched her up as best she could and ordered her to leave.

Desperate, Samira hailed a rickshaw and brought her to the hospital, leaving the nurses a note with Aneetha’s parents’ address.

When Joseph and Balraj arrived, the girl lay motionless, pale, with oxygen and a drip.

The doctor received them with a grave voice:

‘She has suffered severe internal haemorrhage. For now we have stemmed it, but further tests are needed. In my opinion she attempted an abortion in the hands of the unskilled.’

Joseph lowered his gaze. Balraj clenched his fists. The hospital corridor was silent, as though all the world’s pain had gathered there.

Joseph, sensing his friend’s embarrassment and rage, placed a hand on his shoulder and said:

‘What matters is that she is here now, and still alive.’

Aneetha’s life hung by a thread. Her story was not hers alone: it was the face of many others, trapped between exploitation and despair. Joseph felt that such a wound could not remain mute.

He returned home with a marked face. The images of the hospital burned within him: Aneetha’s fragile body, her laboured breathing, the blood he had seen. He sought Manju, as one seeks a hold.

‘The girl... she has undergone an abortion,’ he said, almost unable to pronounce the words. ‘Fifteen years old, and already forced to this.’

Manju looked at him firmly.

‘Joseph, listen to me. You cannot reduce everything to a phrase. We know nothing: whether she chose it, whether she was forced, whether she had any choice. We do not know the circumstances.’

Joseph passed a hand over his face. Within him he felt a conflict: his priestly formation cried that life is sacred, that abortion is an irreparable wound. Yet before his eyes was the face of a lost girl, bearing months of violence and fear.

‘What reasons could ever justify such an act?’ he murmured.

‘It is not about justification,’ Manju replied, calm yet resolute.

‘It is about seeing reality: a fifteen-year-old girl, missing for months, now in hospital, in danger of death. And here outside are her parents, destroyed, confused. They have just found their daughter and risk losing her again. We must not judge. We must stand beside them, comfort, help.’

Joseph lowered his gaze. Manju's words pierced him, opening a wound he did not wish to face.

'Do not forget,' she continued, 'that a young, inexperienced mind, without solid moral or religious formation, cannot have the rigid principles you carry from your training. Psychological pressure, fear, shame... in adolescents these are uncontrollable forces. You cannot expect from her the clarity that you have.'

Joseph remained silent. Within him weighed two voices: that of moral law, clear and unyielding, and that of compassion, calling him to bend over fragility. "*Perhaps the truth lies in holding both together,*" he thought. "*Not renouncing the light, but not extinguishing the wounded.*"

The next day they returned to the hospital. Balraj and his wife sat beside Aneetha's bed. When they saw them, Balraj rose and greeted them with a weary yet relieved smile.

'The doctor says she is out of danger,' he said.

'She will need time to recover, not only physically, but above all within. She has suffered traumas that would break even stronger adults. But she is alive.'

Joseph and Manju drew near. The girl, pale, opened her eyes and with a faint voice whispered to her mother:

'Forgive me... take me home. I missed you so much.'

Joseph felt a knot tighten in his throat. There was no longer room for judgement, only for closeness. In that fragile, truthful whisper lay already all the theology that was needed: the need to be loved, welcomed, forgiven.

Chapter XI

THE COEXISTENCE OF RELIGIONS

Manju's nursery was adorned for celebration: garlands of flowers, colourful ribbons, the courtyard filled with voices and laughter. The beginning of the school year was always a special moment, and that morning it seemed as though the whole neighbourhood had gathered.

At eight o'clock, the prayer meeting for staff and Christian families filled the hall with songs and acclamations. Hands clapped in rhythm, voices rose strong, and yet Joseph, seated among them, felt a weight. He looked at the smiling faces, but within himself he sensed an enthusiasm that seemed forced, made of slogans and repeated phrases. He shifted uneasily, as though a stranger amidst that joy.

When the pastor took the floor, his voice rang firm:

'Jesus is the only God. Not like the thousand gods of the Hindus, nor like Allah of the Muslims. Our task is to make Christ known to all, so that they may embrace the true faith.'

Joseph shivered. Those words seemed harsh, arrogant. He rose quietly, almost unnoticed, and stepped outside. He needed air.

Later, during the celebration open to all, the pastor returned to the pulpit. This time his tone was different, more welcoming:

'We are here to help the children grow healthy and strong, safe from dangers. The most important truth they must learn is that

God loves us and always protects us.'

The applause was warm. Then the refreshments dissolved the tension, and the festivity resumed with lightness.

Back home, in the silence of evening, Manju approached Joseph. She had been watching him for hours: unusual, taciturn, his gaze dark.

'I saw you leave during the sermon,' she said softly. 'And today you were not the Joseph I know. Will you tell me what weighs on you?'

Joseph sighed, searching for words.

'That sermon wounded me, Manju. It reminded me of old, conservative preaching I heard as a boy. All Joel's teaching on tolerance, on universal love, seemed erased. I do not doubt that Jesus is God, but to reduce faith to a crusade to convert others... that I cannot accept.'

Manju listened attentively, her face serious yet gentle.

'I understand,' she said. Then she pressed him further, realising Joseph needed to release the bitterness he carried within, perhaps since leaving the priesthood... or perhaps even before.

'Tell me: how should one act when religion becomes chains instead of freedom? When it enslaves instead of liberate?'

Joseph paused, thoughtful. Then he spoke with firm voice:

'One of the great problems of India today is precisely this. The dialogue and coexistence that have always existed among religions are now crumbling. Fundamentalist groups, in every faith, want to impose their creed. But India's future lies in

rebuilding respect, in seeing in the other a brother or sister, even if they think differently.’

Manju nodded, with a faint smile.

‘So, our task is not to convert...’

‘No,’ Joseph replied. ‘It is not to convert, nor to preach. It is to show that we are at peace in what we believe. Our joy, our serenity: these will speak. These will draw others.’

Silence filled the room. Manju looked at him with shining eyes, as though those words had finally loosened a knot. She began to see again the Joseph who had made her fall in love. Joseph, meanwhile, felt that the weight within him was transforming into a new strength. Now he began to glimpse a new way of being among those people who still seemed strange to him.

Chapter XII

CHRONICLE OF A NEIGHBOURHOOD IN FLAMES

Joseph was tidying the office of the hotel manager where he worked when the morning newspaper, left open on the desk, caught his attention. The headline on the front page was written in bold black letters:

“Ananda Nagar Mosque set ablaze overnight. No casualties, but tension rises.”

The article continued:

“The flames destroyed the religious building and damaged several nearby homes, all belonging to Muslim families. Leaflets were found at the scene bearing the words: ‘Go back to Bangladesh, there is no place for you here.’ The police have promised thorough investigations, but the community fears further episodes of violence.”

Joseph read with growing unease. The fears he had voiced about fundamentalism were becoming reality. It was no longer merely a theoretical discourse, but a concrete fact touching lives and homes.

The following day, the paper reported that some young Muslims, driven by anger, had attacked the Durga temple with stones and coloured paint, and that the unrest had spread throughout the neighbourhood. The police had intervened, but without tangible

results. Witnesses spoke of cries, of families trying to protect children, of elders weeping before defaced statues.

Joseph was still reading when Arjun, his Hindu colleague at the reception, entered the office. Seeing the newspaper spread on the desk, he stopped and said:

‘Have you read? It’s terrible. It is not religion that burns, it is people’s homes.’

Joseph looked at him with interest.

‘You are Hindu, Arjun. Tell me, how do you see this situation? Is it truly a war of faiths?’

Arjun shook his head.

‘No, Joseph. Faith has nothing to do with it. Ordinary people, Muslim or Hindu, only want to live in peace. But there are men who use religion as a weapon. I know Muslim families who pray beside our homes, and they have never harmed us. It is politics, it is money that fuels these flames.’

Those words struck Joseph. He was not accustomed to hearing a Hindu speak with such clarity and openness.

In the days that followed, the reports grew richer in detail. A mosque leader, confiding in a relative employed at the central police office, had discovered that behind the fires and the leaflets was the hand of Rajan Mitra, a powerful local boss. It was not religious hatred, but speculation: to empty the Muslim section of Ananda Nagar, close to the main road leading to the city centre, in order to build a shopping mall and an entertainment complex. The newspaper also carried voices from the neighbourhood:

“*They do not want our faith, they want our land,*” said one woman interviewed.

“*The police do not defend us, they leave us alone,*” added a young man.

Joseph read those lines aloud and Arjun sighed.

‘You see? This is how people are divided. First anger is kindled, then fear does the rest.’

In the following days there was another fire at the meat and fish market. Images showed charred stalls, burnt fish, clouds of black smoke in the air. People protested against the police for their inefficiency, while a petrol bomb was thrown at one of Mitra’s restaurants. This time the investigations immediately focused on the young Muslims of Ananda Nagar, to whom the bomb was attributed.

The municipal council then decided to clear the area within a year, inviting redevelopment projects. Only one arrived: that of Mitra’s architect. Private residences, a rickshaw terminal, and at the centre the great shopping mall.

Joseph could not help but think: “*The chronicle of Ananda Nagar seems already written. Violence as a tool, religion as a mask, profit as the ultimate goal.*”

Arjun observed him and added calmly:

‘But history is never written entirely. It depends on who has the courage to tell it differently.’

Joseph closed the newspaper and remained silent for a long time. He gazed from the office window at the slow-moving traffic, the

indifferent passers-by. He bought a copy of that paper to keep at home. He felt that those lines were not merely news: they were a signal, a warning. The story of Ananda Nagar risked becoming the story of the whole country, if no one found the courage to resist.

Chapter XIII

AMONG RUINS AND CHILDREN

Joseph and Manju accepted Leena and her husband's invitation to visit the areas struck by the fires. Walking through the blackened streets, Joseph felt the pastoral spirit within him resurface, the compassion and concern for the people, for the poor, for the children he saw running among the ruins as though nothing had happened.

The burnt houses still stood, with cracked walls and broken doors. Yet what struck most were the children: dressed in rags, barefoot, yet moving with ease, as though that environment was their home. Joseph stopped to watch them. "*What will it be of them?*" he thought. Would they be relocated together, preserving the bonds of neighbourhood that sustained them, or scattered across different districts, left to themselves?

Leena stood beside him in silence. It was her husband who spoke: 'If these families were sent to rural areas, as my wife's cousin did, they would have a more dignified life. There they could rebuild communities, create religious and social structures without fear of attack.'

Joseph nodded, but within himself he thought: "*Then why had all these people come here?*" Why had the four of them come here? He knew that the countryside was not always a safe refuge. Poverty and monsoons could destroy everything in an instant.

They stopped at a small street food stall for tea. On the counter, beside the steaming cups, was a tray of *Cham Cham*, typical Bengali sweets: soft and spongy, made of dried curdled milk and sugar syrup, covered with coconut or cream. Joseph took one, curious.

To break the silence, he asked the waiter a question:

‘Were you born here in Calcutta?’

The young man smiled and shook his head.

‘No! My family arrived ten years ago from a rural area beyond the border. There we had a small farm with cows and hens. We sold milk and eggs. But the monsoons ruined us: the high water killed the hens, the feed for the animals became too costly. We could not survive. So, we came to the city.’

Joseph listened attentively. The boy continued:

‘Now I work here. My parents had a meat stall, one of those destroyed in the fire. With that we earned enough to allow my sister to study to become a nurse, but the loss of the stall has put her education at risk. I strive to work as much as possible so that this chance does not collapse.’

Leena looked at him with compassion. Joseph felt within himself the voice of the pastor that could not be silenced: “*How many lives suspended between countryside and city, between hope and misery.*”

Leena’s husband resumed the conversation:

‘So then, is it better the tranquillity of the countryside or the chance to try one’s fortune in the city?’

It was Manju who replied, with a realistic tone:

‘Calcutta is a megalopolis with almost fifteen million inhabitants. It grows by more than 300,000 people each year. The majority live below the poverty line. Children, after two or three years of school, go to work eight or ten hours a day to help their families. Often, they accept jobs that damage their health, already fragile from lack of nourishment.’

Joseph lowered his gaze to his cup of tea. He felt the weight of those words. His mind returned to the images of the children among the ruins. “*How can a shepherd remain indifferent?*”

The waiter, almost timidly, added:

‘*Saib*, I do not know whether the countryside or the city is better. But I know that here, at least, my sister can dream of becoming a nurse. And that dream is worth the effort.’

Joseph smiled. In that moment he understood that his task was not to provide definitive answers, but to safeguard the fragile dreams of those without a voice. The visit to the ruins became for him a summons: it was not enough to denounce violence, one had to accompany the people in hope, even when it seemed impossible.

Chapter XIV

A SEED OF HOPE

Joseph could not rid his mind of the images of the children of Ananda Nagar. Those curious eyes, those bare feet running among the ruins, seemed to him a direct summons to his pastoral vocation. He decided he could not remain still. He had to do something, even small, but concrete.

Taking advantage of Sunday morning, when Manju's nursery was closed and many of her colleagues were engaged in religious service, Joseph proposed to Manju and Leena that they start a literacy programme for the children of the neighbourhood. Leena's husband undertook to speak with the local Imam. At first the man was suspicious: he knew Joseph and the others were Christians and feared that behind the initiative lay an intent to convert. But after a long dialogue, they reached agreement: no religion, only basic education, and the door open to anyone who wished to collaborate, Muslim or Christian. Lessons would be free, without structures to maintain, and only on Sundays, so as not to take from the children the school time or the work their families needed.

During Friday prayers, the Imam gave good publicity, emphasising that whatever they managed to build together to strengthen their neighbourhood would slow the government's

attempt at relocation.

Thus, the following Sunday, three young women teachers from the neighbourhood appeared in the square beside the well. They had spread mats on the ground, and gradually about twenty children arrived, more out of curiosity than desire to learn. Manju immediately took charge: she divided them into three groups, according to age and reading ability. Joseph watched with emotion: from nothing, a small school was being born.

The following week, thanks to the Methodist church's social centre, they managed to procure small blackboards with chalk, as well as notebooks and pencils. Nearly fifty children came, and the classes had to be doubled. Joseph noticed that, despite their eagerness to learn, the children's attention was fragile, undermined by malnutrition. He decided then to ask help from the hotel owner where he worked. The man provided a good supply of peanut butter, while a local baker offered fresh bread. So, every Sunday, alongside lessons, the children received a snack that revived them.

Suspensions, however, were not lacking. Some feared that behind the initiative lay a conversion attempt. Others, who exploited children as cheap labour, saw education as a danger: boys able to read and write might feel stronger and rebel. Even some Hindus in the neighbourhood looked on with mistrust, fearing the initiative would strengthen only the Muslim community.

Joseph thus found himself exercising constant diplomacy: reassuring some, dismantling the criticisms of others, avoiding

conflicts. It was exhausting work, but he felt it brought him back to the centre of his life: to be a pastor, not of a church, but of a wounded people.

One episode struck him particularly. Among the children was Rahim, an eight-year-old boy who had never held a pencil. The first time he managed to write his name, he showed it proudly to Joseph, as though it were a trophy. Joseph was moved: that simple gesture was proof that a seed of hope was sprouting.

Another day, a young woman arrived, Suleima, who had decided to help as a volunteer. She was the daughter of a butcher whose stall had been destroyed in the fire. Despite economic hardship, she found time to teach the children their first words in English. ‘If they learn English,’ she told Joseph, ‘they will have more chances of finding work.’

Her determination inspired the other volunteers.

Even Arjun, Joseph’s Hindu colleague, returned to lend support. He brought some old schoolbooks of his brother and donated them to the children.

‘Religion does not matter,’ he said with a smile. ‘A book is a book, and belongs to whoever reads it.’

Joseph embraced him: it was proof that interreligious collaboration was not a dream, but a possible reality.

After a month of activity, the first results were visible. Some children could read simple sentences, others could write their own names. Their health improved thanks to the Sunday snack, but above all through the desire to live instilled in them by their

pride. Families, initially mistrustful, began to see the initiative as a gift.

Joseph, seated beside the well, watched the children laughing and writing in their notebooks. He felt that his life, marked by doubts and guilt, was finding here a new direction. It was not a return to formal ministry, but a different way of being a pastor: among the ruins, among the poor, among the children who learnt to write their names as though it were a prayer.

Chapter XV

AN UNEXPECTED HELP

Joseph had awaited the festival of the goddess Kali with a certain trepidation. Not so much for the celebration itself, but for the chance it offered him to return to Kalighat, that neighbourhood still bearing the marks of misery and hope. There, where Mother Teresa had transformed an ancient temple into a refuge for the dying, he felt he might rediscover a thread binding him to the roots of his mission.

Walking through the crowded streets, past stalls of flowers and votive offerings, Joseph perceived a contrast almost violent: on one side the cult of Kali, with its vivid colours and its summons to destruction and rebirth; on the other, the memory of that slight woman who had chosen to bend over the poorest, turning the place into a house of mercy. Each step seemed a pilgrimage, each face encountered a summons to his conscience.

He entered the House of the Dying. The acrid smell of medicines and suffering bodies mingled with the silence of prayers. He paused, watching the sisters tending with simple, patient gestures. He felt within himself a kind of intoxication, as though a fire urged him to do more, to run beyond the limits he had set. But at once he realised the danger: the temptation to accelerate, to impose his own pace, could destroy the fragile harmony of the project he was building with Manju and the volunteers.

He recalled the rules they had established: everything free, only Sunday mornings, open to all. Yet the number of children was growing, the needs multiplying, the space no longer sufficient. His impatience risked overwhelming the others. He had never been a man of prudence, yet now he felt that without prudence the dream might dissolve.

He decided then to continue towards the Mother House, the general house of the Missionaries of Charity. There, before Mother Teresa's tomb, he would seek a sign. He entered the chapel and knelt. Silence enveloped him like a cloak. It had been long since he prayed with such intensity. The words flowed spontaneously, almost a confession:

"I know I am not worthy to be here, nor to compare my work with yours. You were faithful, you left the convent to embrace an even more austere life. God could work in you because you made yourself a humble, docile instrument. I, instead, have acted on my own. I followed my heart, which led me to Manju, and I still believe it was the right choice. But I abandoned prayer, I abandoned consecration. If anything good has been born in Calcutta, it is God's doing, who knows how to use even broken instruments like me. Now I ask you: how far should I go? How can I avoid the dangers of our rashness and the jealousy of the powerful? Give me a sign, that I may recognise God's will beyond my own ideas."

When he rose, his heart was lighter. The fog had not lifted, but at least he felt he was not alone. He went out and sought a small

restaurant. He sat, ordered chapati with chicken curry and a steaming cup of tea. As he ate calmly, he noticed a bus stopping before the Mother House. Numerous sisters alighted. On the side of the bus was written: Karuna Nilaya, Sisters of Mercy – Ranji. Joseph stiffened. That name resounded like a summons. Karuna, mercy. Those sisters belonged to Ananda's congregation. A sudden desire urged him to meet them. He returned to the chapel and waited until they finished their devotion. Then he approached an elderly sister.

'Mother, are you Sisters of Mercy?' he asked respectfully.

'Yes,' replied the nun, surprised.

'Years ago, in southern Karnataka, I met one of your sisters, Sister Ananda. She was a friend of a dear friend of mine, Father Joel. I have had no news of her for a long time. Do you know where she is?'

The sister smiled.

'She has returned to India. She now lives in our provincial house, on the outskirts of Hyderabad. She was unwell, the climate in Syria had become too harsh for her. They allowed her to return.' Joseph felt a shiver. Perhaps this was the sign he had asked for. He requested the address and a contact number, thanked her, and left with his heart full of enthusiasm.

He returned home by taxi.

Manju welcomed him with a curious look.

'Did you see Mother Teresa risen from the dead?' she teased.

'No,' Joseph replied, 'but she worked a miracle for me.'

Manju's face grew attentive.

‘What happened?’

‘Do you remember Ananda, Sister Joel's friend, the one I went to for counsel in the difficult times at Balajinagar? She has returned to India, to Hyderabad. Perhaps one day I may visit her.’

Manju laughed:

‘Now I am jealous. I thought I was your only woman and counsellor, and instead I find myself with such a powerful rival.’

Joseph laughed with her. The tension dissolved in a moment of complicity. They sat at table, sharing the meal and the hope.

Chapter XVI

ANANDA

The more Joseph devoted himself to the Sunday work with the children, the more his need to speak with Ananda grew. Her figure returned to his mind like a distant yet vivid echo: her gentle voice, her reassuring calm, the memory of Joel intertwined with her. How long had it been since they last met? And what could he say to her now? He had never written again, never thanked her for the advice she had given. Above all, Ananda did not know that he had abandoned the priesthood, left Balajinagar, and chosen to live with Manju. What would she think? Would she lose trust in him? Would she be disappointed?

These thoughts tormented him, yet within himself Joseph felt that Ananda would never judge him. She was like Joel: able to listen without condemning, to encourage without imposing.

As soon as he could, he took the train to Hyderabad. The city appeared different from Calcutta: more orderly, more modern, without the imposing colonial buildings nor the slums that in Calcutta showed themselves without shame. Here, perhaps, they were better hidden. From the station he asked for directions and set out towards Imliban, from where buses departed for the outskirts. He arrived in Secunderabad, the twin city across the river, and found a small guesthouse to rest.

The next morning, he went to the provincial house of the Sisters

of Mercy. To the sister who welcomed him he said:

‘Please, tell Sister Ananda that Joseph is here, Father Joel’s friend.’

The young nun led him through a courtyard to a building where the sisters in need of care were housed.

Ananda recognised him at once. Without hesitation she came forward and embraced him warmly.

‘Joseph, what a surprise! How long... How are things? Are you still in Balajinagar? Tell me, I am eager to hear of the great things you are doing.’

Joseph felt embarrassed. They walked together to the garden and sat on a bench before a small fountain where fish darted in the water.

‘I have missed you greatly, sister. I have missed your wisdom, as I have missed Joel’s.’

She, noticing the embarrassment on his face, looked at him gently and interrupted:

‘Have you already forgotten that I am Ananda, not “mother”? Let us return to speaking as friends. Tell me, what troubles you so much that it has brought you here?’

Joseph lowered his gaze.

‘The last time we met you gave me a letter from Joel, the one I had brought you in Syria after his death. You told me it would help me discern my life. Since then...’

And he began to recount. He spoke of his relationship with Manju, of the child they had lost, of his decision to leave

everything and begin anew. He told of the difficult early days in Calcutta, the struggles to help the poor, and finally the Sunday school.

Ananda listened attentively, never interrupting. Her face remained serene, free of judgement, the same face that had struck him in the darkest moments of the past.

Joseph concluded with trembling voice:

‘Now I find myself no longer a priest, living with the woman I love but cannot marry, working in a job that gives me security but does not belong to me, and carrying forward a fragile work without a structure to support us. I would like to do more, but how? And if I make mistakes? And if because of me others suffer, as already happened in Balajinagar?’

Ananda looked him in the eyes.

‘Joseph, reconsider your questions. You are no longer a priest: I do not know if that is right or wrong, but I know you followed your conscience and your heart. God looks at this, not at the rest. You love someone and cannot marry her: your love is what matters; God will speak to you through it. You have a job that does not satisfy you: it reminds you that choices do not always bring immediate joy, but all is part of a greater design. You are not a hero, you are a man, and you need support. Your work allows you to commit more to other activities. As for the support you think you lack: you have it, and it is God. It is not you who works, it is He who uses you and your collaborators. Not because you are special, but because you are humble and honest. He will

not abandon you.’

Joseph shook his head.

‘But I have betrayed Him.’

‘No, Joseph. You have not betrayed God. Perhaps you have betrayed your ideals, your promises, but God is greater than all this. God is love, and He will never abandon you.’

‘But I no longer feel Him. It has been months, years since I prayed.’

‘Yours is not laziness, but fear, guilt. You are still bound to the structures that sustained you as a priest, but now judge you unfaithful, a traitor. Those structures no longer help you. What matters is God. If they prevent you from meeting Him, let them fall and abandon yourself into the arms of mercy.’

Joseph listened in disbelief. Such a humble and holy sister spoke words that in the past he might have condemned as heretical, yet he felt how true they were. In those words he discovered a new meaning for his life, a different way of living the relationship with the One to whom he had promised everything.

Ananda concluded:

‘Remember, now you have Manju. Keep her close, for it is through your love that God will speak to you. For the rest, let Him act. If you make mistakes, He will help you rise again. If people are hurt, He will know how to transform that pain into grace.’

Chapter XVII

THE WEIGHT OF RAINS

The monsoon season arrived like a sudden blow, and Calcutta seemed to bend beneath its weight. The streets, already fragile and worn, turned into muddy rivers where rickshaws struggled with wheels sunk to the hubs. The drivers, barefoot in the mire, pushed with desperate strength, but customers were few: those who could afford it preferred to remain shut indoors, far from waters that carried not only rain but also fear.

In Ananda Nagar, the poor quarter, rain was never just rain. It was a torrent dragging rubbish, plastic, animal carcasses, all ending in the open sewers. These, clogged with water and filth, spewed back a putrid flood that returned to the streets and seeped into homes. Families found themselves living with water up to their knees, breathing the stench of rot and mould. Each storm was a siege, each night a nightmare of water rising, rising, without respite.

The Sunday school, which until recently had found space in the square, became unusable. The children could not sit on the muddy ground, and their notebooks were soaked at the first downpour. It was Rahim, ever closer to Joseph, almost his spontaneous secretary, who proposed a solution: his father was caretaker of a gym, free on Sunday mornings. Joseph and Rahim

went to speak with the owner, a Christian fitness enthusiast who sponsored youth cricket and volleyball teams. After some hesitation, they reached an agreement: the gym would be available until noon, provided it was left tidy and 5,000 rupees were paid each Sunday.

It was an enormous sum for them, since the children could not contribute and the teachers were all volunteers. Joseph sought a sponsor, and unexpectedly found one in the president of the Methodist church council, who had taken the project to heart. Not only did he agree to cover the costs, but he also sent more notebooks and pencils. Thus, every Sunday morning at seven, the troop of children and their teachers set out from Ananda Nagar's fountain and walked half an hour to the gym.

The monsoon, however, brought not only logistical difficulties. It brought hunger. Vegetables became scarce and expensive, rice rose in price, and families had to choose between eating and seeking treatment. Diseases multiplied: pneumonia, intestinal infections, malaria, chikungunya, dengue. Each week someone was missing at school. An absent child often meant a hospital bed, and sometimes an improvised grave.

Every Sunday, a doctor from the Methodist centre accompanied them to the gym, examined the children present, and, if necessary, went to their homes to see sick siblings or parents. It was a small sign of hope, but not enough to erase the pain.

Manju, teaching with gentleness and patience, felt each absence as a wound. There was nothing she could do against the fury of

the waters and fevers, and her helplessness consumed her. Joseph watched everything with tearful eyes. And in the evening, when he spoke with Manju, he considered that natural disasters, wherever they struck, brought suffering and destruction. But when they struck the poor, the consequences were ten times worse. There was no insurance, no savings, no protection. Only bare life, exposed to the fury of the elements. To stand with the poor meant also this: to accept having no immediate solutions, but to remain beside them, sharing the burden, carrying it together.

The rains continued, day after day, and it seemed the city no longer had a sky, but only a roof of black clouds. The tin houses trembled under the blows of the wind, and the children walked with water up to their ankles, dragging sandals caught in the mud. Each step was a struggle, each breath a risk.

And yet, on Sunday mornings, the group set out all the same. They walked through puddles and torrents, notebooks clutched beneath their shirts, and arrived at the gym. There, for a few hours, the sound of rain became a distant background, and the children's voices filled the space with songs, readings, games. It was a fragile miracle, but real: an oasis of light in the midst of the deluge.

Joseph knew he could not stop the monsoon. But he could, at least, prevent the children from feeling alone. And in that gesture, small yet immense, he found his strength.

Chapter XVIII

CHOLERA IN ANANDA NAGAR

The peak of the disasters caused by the monsoon came when a cholera outbreak flared in Ananda Nagar. The news spread like lightning, and immediately the health authorities decided to seal off the neighbourhood: those inside could not leave, those outside could not enter. The streets, already submerged in foul waters, became impassable boundaries. Fear seeped everywhere, and the Sunday school was suspended indefinitely. Even Manju's nursery, though distant from the affected area, emptied: parents preferred to keep their children at home, fearing the contagion might reach them.

Even doctors and health workers hesitated to venture into Ananda Nagar. They said medicines were scarce, ineffective, often expired. No vaccine was yet available, and experimental prophylaxis was reserved for public workers or those with enough money to pay. The poor, as always, were left defenceless. Manju could not bear the thought that her children were there, alone, with no one to take their temperature or give them a glass of boiled water. Each day she received fragmentary news, brought by a paramedic friend of Leena. The latter, remaining inside the perimeter, had been chosen by neighbours as coordinator of aid and had obtained a pass allowing her, at times, to reach the medical district. Her notes spoke of sick children,

desperate families, bodies hastily burned on improvised pyres to prevent further contagion.

Five of their children were already dead. Three more lay in bed with high fever, vomiting, dehydration.

Each word was a blade in Manju's heart. Until one evening, with firm voice, she said to Joseph:

'Tomorrow I am going to Ananda Nagar. Leena told me she can get me through, pretending I am a social worker sent by the municipality.'

Joseph looked at her in disbelief.

'You're mad. It's dangerous. You're not a doctor, you have no medicines. What do you think you can do?'

'Perhaps nothing,' Manju replied. 'But at least the people will see we have not abandoned them. In moments like these, having a friend beside them is worth more than all the medicines in the world.'

'But you risk your life. And if something happens to you, what will become of our project?'

'The project is for tomorrow, the illness is today. I will be careful: I will wash my hands constantly, wear a mask, drink only boiled water.'

There was no persuading her.

The next morning, accompanied by Leena, she managed to enter the neighbourhood. Rahim joined them at once: he knew every lane, every house of his friends. The streets bore the marks of great fires: the pyres where the bodies of the dead had been

hastily burned, to prevent the disease spreading. The air was heavy with ash and fear.

The first house they visited was that of Salena, a ten-year-old girl. She lay in bed, her face hollowed by illness, already resembling that of an old woman. Her mother sat beside her, caressing her and giving her at intervals a sip of boiled water with a spoon of sugar, to ease the terrible thirst.

‘She has been like this for two days,’ said the mother. ‘She cannot eat, her mouth is dry, she cannot swallow. I prepare purée of bananas and tapioca, very diluted, and feed her thus. The doctor gave antibiotics, but I see no improvement.’

Manju and Leena set to helping: they tidied the house, prepared more purée, washed the clothes to disinfect them. Then they remained in silence beside the child, sharing the mother’s pain.

The day went on thus, house after house. Each family had its story of fever, of tears, of bodies burned in haste. Each open door was a new blow to the heart.

When Manju returned home, she was exhausted. She had no appetite, no strength. She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes. All she had seen burned within her. She had brought a little light into those homes, but she felt like a candle quickly consuming its wick. She said nothing, but prayed silently for her children, for their families, for Ananda Nagar entire.

Chapter XIX

MANJU

The neighbourhood of Ananda Nagar seemed to breathe again. The streets, washed by the heavy rains, had dried beneath a clear, almost benevolent sun. Children returned to play among the houses, women spread colourful clothes on the low roofs, and men resumed the slow rhythm of daily work. Manju, faithful to her commitment, continued to visit families, bringing comfort and words of hope. The cholera epidemic now seemed a memory, yet a subtle shadow still hovered among the people: the fear that it might all begin again.

One morning, however, it was she herself who awoke with sudden pain. Violent cramps gripped her intestines, her mouth was parched, and a sense of weakness prevented her from rising with her usual energy. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she recognised the symptoms at once. No explanations were needed: the illness she had seen devastate so many lives now knocked at her door.

Joseph had gone early to work, so with immense effort she dragged herself to the door and called:

‘Balraj,’ then, with faint voice, added:

‘Take this money and bring me at once to the hospital. There is no time to lose.’

The young man, frightened but obedient, ran to fetch a rickshaw.

Manju was taken to the infectious diseases ward, where doctors admitted her without hesitation.

Joseph, as soon as he heard the news, requested days off from work. He could not leave her alone. Completely covered in protective gear, the anti-infection suit that made every gesture clumsy and every breath heavy, he sat beside her bed. Through his gloves he held Manju's hand, trying to transmit warmth and strength, while behind the visor his eyes betrayed the fear burning within him. She, with a fragile yet luminous smile, seemed to dissolve that fear, as though her serenity were stronger than the illness.

'Do not worry, Joseph,' she murmured, with a smile meant to reassure.

'We have faced worse battles. Remember when we had nothing and yet managed to build the school? Somehow, we always found a solution. This time too we shall succeed.'

But the pains grew ever stronger. Manju endured them in silence, never complaining. Her strength was that of one who does not wish to burden others, who transforms suffering into an act of love. Joseph watched her, powerless, and felt within himself a pain he could not name.

On the fifth day of hospitalisation, Manju asked for paper and pen. With trembling hand, she wrote a letter to her parents. The words were simple, yet full of tenderness: a greeting, a memory, an invitation not to weep too much. When she had finished, she handed the sheet to Joseph.

‘Keep it. If I do not return, take it to them.’

The following day, her voice faded. Her breathing grew slow, then silent. Joseph remained beside her until the last instant, unable to accept that that light was extinguishing. When the doctors declared her death, he felt the world collapse upon him. Manju’s body was cremated according to tradition. At the Methodist church the funeral was celebrated: the nave was crowded with friends and acquaintances, but outside, in the square, an immense crowd gathered. Thousands of people, Muslims and Hindus, had come from all Calcutta and above all from Ananda Nagar. They were all there: Leena, Lavinia, Balraj, Praveen, Rahim, Aneetha, ... Religion or origin did not matter: all wished to pay homage to the woman who had had the courage to stand beside them in their hardest moments. Now it was their turn to show gratitude and to accompany Joseph, who, consumed by grief, could scarcely stand.

Back home, Joseph placed the ashes on a small table in the corner where Manju loved to set flowers. At times he had brought her some, and now that space became a silent altar. For three days he did not leave the house. He remained in bed, prostrate, without eating, drinking only a little sugared milk. Pain was an impenetrable wall, and solitude seemed to swallow him.

On the fourth day, a Monday, someone knocked at the door. With effort he rose and opened. Before him stood Rahim, accompanied by five of his friends.

‘Joseph,’ Rahim said firmly, ‘yesterday we did not see you at

Ananda Nagar. We must restart the school.'

Joseph looked at them, unable to speak. The memory of Manju was too strong, but in the boys' eyes shone a hope he could not ignore. It was as though her voice still resounded, asking him not to abandon what they had built together.

At last, with a faint voice, he replied:

'Give me just a few days to settle some things... and then we shall meet again.'

The boys nodded, smiling. In that smile Joseph found the strength to rise again. He owed it to them, but above all he owed it to her. It was not the end, but a new, though even harder, beginning. Manju was no longer there, yet her presence continued to live in the hearts of those she had touched.

Chapter XX

A POSTHUMOUS RECONCILIATION

The train slowed as it entered Bhubaneshwar station. Joseph, seated by the window, gazed at the familiar tracks and felt a knot tighten in his throat. Returning to those places was like reopening a wound: every corner reminded him of Manju, the happy days spent together, the discussions, the dreams. Now he carried with him a letter that could not be posted, a sheet heavier than a thousand stones. He had to deliver it in person, looking into her parents' eyes, telling them how courageous their daughter had been, right to the end.

During the journey, his thoughts tormented him. It seemed as though he were reliving the time when, after Joel's death, he had gone to Syria to bring Ananda the news. It was the second time he had to announce the death of the person dearest to him, handing over a farewell letter. Each step brought him closer to a grief he did not know how to face.

Arriving before the house, he hesitated a moment. Then he rang the bell. The door opened slowly: Manju's mother recognised him at once. At the sight of him she felt a sudden blow, a foreboding that froze her heart. Why him, and not her?

'Joseph... come in, please. Sit on the sofa.'

The woman went to the corridor and called her husband:

'Come and see who has come to visit us.'

Manju's father appeared at the doorway, surprised. For an instant his face stiffened, as though he wished to be angry, but something within held him back. It was not right.

Joseph rose to his feet.

'I have come to bring you sad news. Perhaps you have read in the papers of the cholera epidemic that struck Calcutta last month. Sadly, your daughter was caught up in it while helping the sick. The illness took its revenge on her, and five days ago it carried her away.'

The words fell like stones. With broken voice, Joseph recounted every detail: from the day they had left Bhubaneswar, to the visits to Ananda Nagar, the nursery, the Sunday school, the children Manju had loved as though they were her own. He tried to hold back tears, but his voice trembled. The parents listened, distraught, and soon they too gave way to weeping.

Joseph handed over the letter. The father took it with trembling hands and began to read aloud:

"Papa, Mama, forgive me for my stubbornness.

Papa, you taught me so much, you taught me to be strong and never to give up before problems; you taught me to be creative and always to seek the truth.

Mama, you taught me to be hardworking, to serve, to help others in need, not with words but with deeds.

What may have seemed gestures of rebellion were my unconscious way of showing you how much I had learnt from you, and of showing my pride in being your daughter.

Forgive me if I hurt you, if I left you, if in all these months I never wrote. I rebuilt a life with Joseph and tried to live it following your example. Together with him we helped many people, to whom I passed on your love. Now I shall not see you again, but from above, where the good Lord awaits me, I shall look down on you every day and repay you for all I could not give you here on earth. I love you.

Manju.”.

The father lowered the sheet, struggling to hold back tears.

‘I never understood my daughter. I always thought her rebellious, stubborn, disrespectful of traditions. The day I struck her, causing the death of her child, a part of me died with him. Seeing her leave took the rest. I would have wished to embrace her once, to ask forgiveness, to beg her to return.’

Joseph drew near.

‘Your daughter was not rebellious. She was a hero. She did not care for herself, but felt the need to do something for others. In Bhubaneswar, in Calcutta, it was she who guided me, who helped me overcome doubts and difficulties. Never once did I hear her complain for herself; she was always debating how to defend others. She was the soul of everything. Thousands of people in Ananda Nagar will forever carry Manju’s smile in their hearts.’

The father looked at him, moved.

‘What will become now of the Sunday school?’

Joseph lowered his gaze. ‘I do not know. The people want it to continue, but the problems are many. The monsoon first and

cholera afterwards have left deep wounds. We shall have to rebuild everything from the start, but without her enthusiasm it will be hard.'

The father rose, resolute.

'I have some money put aside. I want to open a foundation in her name. I will involve my colleagues and others besides. If you agree, we shall think of building a place to restart and provide what you need.'

Joseph remained silent, overwhelmed by emotion. That visit, which he feared would be only pain, was turning into a new impetus. Manju's memory would not be buried: it would generate life, hope, future.

Chapter XXI

A NEW DAWN

At the inauguration of the new building, the crowd was larger than Joseph had imagined. Familiar and unfamiliar faces mingled, some coming from the school in Balajinagar, eager to pay homage to their former teacher and to see again the priest who had once guided them. Manju's father, with voice firm yet moved, spoke to the community about the new foundation, recounting his daughter's dream and inviting all to feel part of that living legacy. Each word was a bridge between past and future, between memory and hope.

Joseph watched with gratitude, but also with a sense of responsibility weighing on his shoulders. It was not merely a building: it was the tangible sign of a rebirth, the fruit of years of toil, tears, and shared love. When he saw Agostino among the crowd, his heart gave a jolt. He had not expected his presence. With a spontaneous gesture, he invited him to join the Methodist pastor for the blessing of the new centre. That gesture, simple and solemn, seemed to say: There is no past or present, but a life that continues.

After the buffet party, people began to disperse. The group from Bhubaneswar suggested taking advantage of the free time to visit the city, since their train would depart only late at night. Joseph was about to accept the invitation when Agostino intervened:

‘Go ahead, we shall meet at Howrah station at half past ten. Joseph and I must speak of business.’ His tone was firm, almost imperious. Joseph was taken aback, but consented. He bade farewell to his friends and remained alone with his former confrère.

‘Business?’ he asked, with a mix of astonishment and mistrust.

‘What is this story?’

Agostino gathered courage.

‘When you left,’ he began, ‘I found your letter in my breviary. Your choice grieved me. I did not understand it. I realised you were suffering, that the trials were too strong for you. But today, seeing what you have built, I understand how important Manju was. Yet now she is gone. You are alone, but also free. Return to us. You are a priest forever; nothing prevents you from coming back. The superiors are willing to send confrères here, to open a community to care for your centre. Think again, Joseph. Return.’ The words fell like arrows driven into Joseph’s heart. A thousand emotions surged: surprise, anger, nostalgia, pain. For a moment he could not speak. Then, with altered voice, he replied:

‘Agostino, my brother, do you think Manju was a misfortunate parenthesis, a closed door? She was the open door that allowed me to be reborn. It was she who helped me rediscover my friendship with God, my place in the world. Even though we could never marry, she and I are still one. Now it is my task to carry forward what her impulse created. It is my task to love these children, also in her name. Manju will live as long as there is

someone proclaiming that it is worth giving one's life to serve others. This Joel taught me first, and Manju now.'

He paused, breathed deeply, and concluded:

'Forgive me, Agostino. Forgive me for leaving you alone. But I cannot return. My place is here.'

The silence that followed was dense, almost sacred. Agostino lowered his gaze, unable to reply. Joseph accompanied him to the station, where he rejoined the friends from Bhubaneswar. The farewells were warm, yet tinged with subtle melancholy.

When the train departed and the lights receded into the night, Joseph remained motionless, as though wishing to imprint that instant of definitive separation upon his memory.

He turned to go home. The sky was dark, but the stars shone with unusual intensity. He lifted his eyes and saw one, bright, that seemed familiar. Then another, beside the first. Two stars, his stars, close, like two inseparable presences. A smile spread across his face. He was not alone. He never would be. Manju and Joel, his guides, continued to watch over him. And in that night sky, Joseph felt his choice confirmed: not a return backwards, but a going forward, faithful to a love that does not die.

The night of Calcutta spread like a mantle, enveloping streets and roofs, markets and stations. Joseph walked slowly towards the centre, but his step was no longer that of the uncertain man, nor of the lost priest. It was the step of one who has found meaning, of one who has chosen to remain faithful to a calling that does not coincide with titles or institutions, but with life itself.

The memory of Manju was no longer a wound, but a spring. Every child who laughed, every hand extended, every voice asking to be heard was a fragment of her, an echo of her passion. Joseph felt that his task was not to guard a monument, but to continue a movement: that of love given without measure, that does not stop before death, that transforms guilt into hope.

The dialogue with Agostino had shown him how easy it was to turn back, to take refuge in a form already known. But true fidelity was not to repeat the past: it was to carry forward the seed that had been planted, even in different soil. The vocation had not been abandoned, but transfigured. No longer only altar and breviary, but faces and stories, tears and smiles. No longer a closed ministry, but an open life.

Joseph understood that his story was not his alone. It was the story of many who had lost and found, of many who had believed and doubted, of many who had loved and suffered. It was the story of a fragile yet tenacious humanity, capable of rising again and beginning anew. And in that thought, his heart opened to immense gratitude.

He walked through the night to Ananda Nagar, wrapped in thoughts and memories.

The centre was there before him, lit by a few lamps. It was not large, not perfect, but it was alive. It was the sign that life can be reborn from ruins, that faith can sprout even beyond boundaries, that God can dwell wherever there is a heart willing to serve. Joseph smiled. He needed nothing more. His mission was clear:

to guard that flame, to feed it, to pass it on.

He lifted his eyes again to the sky. The two stars still shone, close, like two travelling companions. Joel and Manju, his silent teachers, watched over him. They were not ghosts, but presences. Not memories, but promises. Every light burning in the sky told him that life does not end, that love does not die, that hope does not fade.

And as he entered, he felt that the novel of his life was not closing, but opening. Each day would be a new chapter, written with different hands, with different voices, with different dreams. There was no longer fear, nor regret. Only the certainty that love, when true, knows no end.

The sun was rising on the horizon; it was dawn, the dawn of a new day in Calcutta.

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Back-cover blurb

Dawn in Calcutta is not a metaphor. It is the hour when the community finds light again after the night. Joseph is now with Manju, ready to start a new life, but how? Together they are building something fragile and necessary. But dawn also reveals what darkness concealed. *A New Dawn in Calcutta* is a novel about what we owe each other, and what happens when that debt becomes too heavy to carry alone.

The Calcutta Trilogy follows Joseph Tiruvalli, a man of the slums, not a hero by any conventional measure — across three novels that trace the full arc of a life lived in Balajinagar (Bhubaneswar) and Ananda Nagar, one of Kolkata's most forgotten corners. From the charged nights of a community finding its voice, through the fragile dawn of new relationships and new purpose, to the long, quiet aftermath of grief and spiritual renewal, the trilogy asks what it means to remain faithful — to people, to God, to truth — when everything is precarious. These are not novels about poverty as spectacle. They are novels about interiority, about the small gestures that hold a community together, and about the kind of grace that arrives without announcement

Hanna Jabali Haddadin is a writer working at the intersection of faith, poverty, and human dignity. Formed in the Catholic missionary tradition, and deeply familiar with the margins of Asian urban life, Haddadin writes fiction that refuses sentimentality without losing compassion. The Calcutta Trilogy — set in the slums, India — is a sustained literary meditation on grief, community, and the fragile persistence of hope among those the world has forgotten. Writing in English and Italian, Haddadin brings to literary fiction the theological depth of a pastor and the restraint of a careful observer of human suffering.